



Lawmakers need resolve to fix budget

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By H&R Editorial Staff

The Illinois General Assembly took an important step last week toward solving the state's huge budget mess.

There are, however, more steps to come perhaps as early as this week.

The Illinois House and Senate both approved a bill last week that eliminates virtually free health care for retired state and university employees, General Assembly members and judges. Instead, the state will determine how much it can put into a fund for health care and retired state employees will have to make up the difference. Currently the annual price tag of covering retiree health care premiums is \$800 million. The bill now heads to the desk of Gov. Pat Quinn, who has said he will sign it.

That's good for the state's taxpayers.

But it's only the first step.

In order to solve the state's budget issues, Quinn and the General Assembly need to address three crucial issues. The easiest was retiree health care. The other two — pension reform and Medicaid reform — will be much harder. The state also needs to address Quinn's plan to close several state facilities. But the big issues are retiree health care, pensions and Medicaid.

So, while we congratulate the General Assembly for taking this step, the job isn't complete. There are reasons to be concerned about whether the General Assembly has the backbone to address the two remaining huge issues in a meaningful way.

Despite overwhelming evidence about the state's financial position, some members of the General Assembly still voted against the change in retiree health care, apparently believing that a solution to the financial crisis would appear out of nowhere. The bill passed easily in the House, but 43 members still found a way to vote against the bill. In the Senate, 20 Senators voted against the bill.

Locally, state Rep. Dan Brady and state Sens. Bill Brady, Kyle McCarter and Shane Cultra should be congratulated for voting for the bill. It's disappointing that state Reps. Adam Brown, Bill Mitchell, Jason Barickman, Keith Sommer and Chapin Rose voted against this bill. All have talked about putting the state's financial house in order, but when given the chance to take that step, they whiffed. The same goes for Sen. Dale Righter, who did not vote, but said he would have voted "no."

The session is in full swing. It is fully expected that a pension reform bill will be discussed this week, most likely today. The two houses may meet over the weekend and the session is scheduled to end May 31.

These crucial decisions need to be made now. Politicians will be tempted to wait until after the November elections. That's unacceptable. The state has delayed solutions to its funding crisis for too long. The General Assembly should stay in session until this important work is complete.

The representatives and senators that voted for this bill should be congratulated for their fortitude. They will need more of it, and some of their fellow members will have to join them, for the state to start on a path to get its financial picture back in order.